DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 880 CS 502 585

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TITLE Teaching Leadership Strategies for Conflict Reduction in Small Groups: A Beginning Exercise.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 9p.; Exercise prepared at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *Conflict Resolution; Decision Making; Discussion Groups; Group Activities; Group Behavior; *Group Discussion; *Group Dynamics; Group Relations; Higher Education; Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; *Leadership Training; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

A conflict resolution exercise has been developed for use in leadership training in small groups. The objectives of the exercise are to provide a decision-making experience in an environment that requires numerous applications of conflict reduction, to enable participants to apply strategies for dealing with specific conflict disruptions that arise in a small group, and to encourage evaluation and discussion of each group leader's adjustive actions in attempting to reduce conflict. Groups of four to six members meet for 30 to 60 minutes and one member other than the leader draws a conflict card to determine his or her role in the discussion of a prepared topic. The conflict card roles represent several typical disruptive types, including excessive talker, mind changer, poor listener, complainer, arguer, power usurper, and ignoramous. Discussion participation continues until the leader has attempted at least one adjustment to the conflicting role player. At that point, the leader stops the discussion of the topic, the role player states the conflict role, the group leader explains his or her attempts to reduce the conflict, and group members evaluate these efforts and make alternative suggestions. (DF)

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TEACHING LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT REDUCTION IN SMALL GROUPS: A BEGINNING EXERCISE

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TEACHING LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT REDUCTION IN SMALL GROUPS: A BEGINNING EXERCISE

Problem solving groups often generate internal conflict. The business conference attempting to decide whether to market a new product may find personality clashes between members block substantive discussion. The district office of a government agency may hold a management meeting to determine an effective approach for orienting new employees, a meeting where progress blockage results from participant digressions and other diversions. A gathering of community leaders to confront the problem of increased local crime may become ensnarled by poorly informed participants and by those wishing a hasty conclusion.

Leadership training for those who will hold responsibility for conferences, meetings, and other group decision making activities can be enhanced by participation in a small group exercise in conflict reduction. This exercise was developed originally for use in discussion sections of the basic speech course[1] with the assumption that the small group activities frequently assigned would be more successful if leaders could handle typical disruptive member responses. Not only did application result in improved small group facilitation, but students enjoyed the exercise. Since its origin, the exercise also has been used with management in both government and business with similar results. If anything, these more mature

adults have responded even more enthusiastically, though learning remains similar.

The objectives of the conflict exercise include: (1) to provide a decision making experience in an environment requiring numerous applications of conflict reduction, (2) to enable participants to apply strategies for dealing with specific conflict disruptions that arise in a small group, and (3) to encourage evaluation and discussion of each group leader's adjustive actions in attempting to reduce conflict.

Allow thirty to sixty minutes for the exercise,[2] and prepare in advance a deck of conflict cards for each small group. Divide participants into groups with four to six members each. Orient them to the exercise by explaining that all group members, one at a time, will have an opportunity to function as a group leader and to deal with conflicting group members. Leaders should attempt to handle conflict situations so that group progress is facilitated. Some possible strategies for group leaders include:[3]

1. "Stress a higher-level goal that all members share."
2. "Reestablish trust by engaging in some cooperative or compromise behavior."
3. "Satisfy individual needs by praising and rewarding members."
4. "Obtain the assistance of a neutral third party."
5. "Shift the discussion to a less controversial subject."

6. "Redefine the group's task."
7. "Divide the group members into compatible subgroups to reexamine various aspects of the question."
8. Gain participation by other members.
9. Initiate a recess or coffee break.
10. Allow other group members to exert pressure on a disruptive member.
11. Convert emotional language into non-emotional language.
12. Request discussion of ideas and not of persons.
13. Arrange seating that is comfortable and provides for easy communicative interaction.
14. Provide progress summaries, or request that someone else do so.
15. Stress the need to stay on the topic under discussion.
16. Interrupt disruptive speaker and provide a transition to another participant or to another point for discussion.
17. Try to protect the egos of everyone, but don't compliment non-productive contributions.

When a group member is serving neither as leader nor conflictor, that member should play an active, normal participative role in the discussion.

Provide a deck of conflict cards for each group. The cards should be shuffled and placed face down in the middle of the discussants. Appoint a leader and tell the person on the leader's right to draw a

conflict card to determine his or her role during the discussion. Remind other members that they should participate normally. Indicate that once the discussion begins, participation should continue until the leader has attempted at least one adjustment to the conflicting role player. At that point, the leader stops the discussion of the group's topic. The role player should state the conflict role. The group leader should explain what he or she attempted to do to reduce the conflict. Group members should evaluate the leader's efforts at dealing with the conflict and make alternative suggestions.

Next, the person on the leader's right becomes the new leader to continue the problem solving discussion. The conflict card is returned to the bottom of the deck, and the person seated to the right of the new leader draws a card from the top of the deck and assumes that role in the ensuing discussion. Again, the leader should stop the discussion after making a fair attempt to cope with the conflictor. The conflict role should be identified. The leader should explain his or her conflict reduction strategy, and the group should evaluate the leader's approach. Leadership and conflict role player assignments should continue rotation until each group member has served as leader at least twice or until time for this participatory activity has ended.

Experience with this exercise indicates that the instructor should provide an initial discussion topic and be prepared to supply new topics after every two group members have served as group leaders. Changing discussion topics encourages sustained active participation by all discussants. Consider using questions as topics so their introduction by a leader encourages immediate participation. Some

previously successful topics include:

1. How can we control the use of handguns by criminals in our society?
2. Should a period of public service be required of all adult Americans?
3. How can we cope with the energy crisis?
4. Should prostitution be legalized?

The deck of conflict cards has been revised several times over the past two years to focus on diversity of disruptive roles, to increase ready adaptibility by role players, and to elicit productive evaluation. Each deck of conflict cards now contains two duplicate cards for each of the following roles:

Play the role of someone who wants to talk excessively about his health, thus requiring the leader to get the discussion back on the group's topic.

Play the role of constantly changing your mind and thus interfering with the progress of the discussion.

Play the role of poor listener constantly asking questions about material that has already been discussed.

Play the role of complaining about the seating arrangement, even though the leader attempts to cope with your disruptive behavior.

Get an argument started that will disrupt your group's progress and require action by the leader. Once stopped, initiate another argument.

Try to lead the group on lengthy digressions that force the leader to intervene.

Play the role of poorly informed participant by trying to be an active discussant who concentrates on making highly uninformed suggestions.

Play the role of trying to get the group through the discussion too rapidly. Keep pushing, even though the leader attempts to cope with your activity.

Participate as an over-talkative member so the leader must interrupt you. Continue your role.

Play the role of trying to take over the group's leadership. Though the leader reacts to you, continue pushing.

The roles on the conflict cards represent several typical disruptive types: excessive talker, mind changer, poor listener, complainer, arguer, digresser, speedster, health nut, power usurper, and ignoramous. Numerous additional disruptive types exist and could be added; however, care should be taken not to employ more roles than students can substantively experience and discuss in depth. Using more than one card with the same role assures opportunity to benefit from renewed experience.

If time permits, the instructor can further process the exercise by reviewing the disruptive roles and asking for suggestions of additional leadership strategies.

Footnotes

[1]A course in public speaking in which discussion sections once a week divide into small groups with assigned leaders to participate in communication simulations and games.

[2]The instructor should monitor carefully the progress of the groups to best assess required time. Consider reviewing the exercise on a future date to reinforce learning.

[3]The first seven strategies were reported in Michael Burgoon, Approaching Speech/Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), pp. 224-25. The remainder, though not entirely novel, are the responsibility of the present writer. For additional discussions of relevant conflict reduction strategies, see: Ernest G. Bormann and Nancy C. Bormann, Speech Communication: An Interpersonal Approach (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 211-227; Michael Burgoon, Judee K. Heston, and James McCroskey, Small Group Communication: A Functional Approach (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), pp. 67-77; Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, Group Dynamics: Research and Theory, Third Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), especially Part Five--"Leadership and Performance of Group Functions," pp. 301-396; Fred E. Jandt, Conflict Resolution Through Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); and Bobby R. Patton and Kim Giffin, Interpersonal Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), especially Chapter 8, "Barriers to Interpersonal Communication," pp. 391-433.